

ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLISM IN CLASSICAL ARMENIAN LITERATURE

THE Continuator to Thomas Artsruni's *History* gives an elaborate description of the palace and church built on the island of Alt'amar in Lake Van by king Gagik at the beginning of the tenth century.¹ The historian found it difficult to express in words his astonishment at the wondrous beauty of these constructions: 'Even if an intelligent man were to examine only one section (of the palace) for several hours on end, on coming out he would be unable to tell anyone of what he had seen.' Commenting on the reliefs that surround the exterior wall of the church, he refers to 'the glorious image of king Gagik, who with proud faith raises the church (i.e. a model of his endowment) on his arms like a gold vessel full of manna, or a golden box filled with perfume; he stands in front of the Lord, depicted as if begging forgiveness for his sins'. In the interior of the church the architect Manuel had 'fashioned the wonderful holy of holies with elegant paintings, with silver doors full of gilt ornaments, with images encased in gold and precious stones and pearl ornaments, and with various notable and splendid vessels which wonderfully show us the second Jerusalem and also the gate of Sion on high'. The historian thus hints at the symbolic representation of the spiritual and immaterial realities of heaven in the material structure and ornament of the church.

On the other hand, numerous Armenian writers are quick to point out that the church in its true meaning is not a material but a spiritual entity. In the homilies attributed to Gregory the Illuminator we read: 'The church is the believing congregation of God.'² The same statement is repeated more than once in Khosrov Andzewats'i's *Commentary on the Liturgy*.³ The mystic poet Gregory of Narek elaborates on the symbolism of the church—that is the congregation (*zholovurd*)—as bride in his

¹ *Patmut'iwn Tann Artsruneats'*, Tiflis, 1917, part IV, chs. 7-8, pp. 477-87.
For the surviving church see S. Der Nersessian, *Aght'amar, Church of the Holy Cross*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

This paper draws together evidence for symbolic interpretations of a church building found in classical Armenian writers. It is not a study of the origins of such interpretations in Eastern Christianity but an attempt to elucidate certain Armenian literary traditions. Only printed sources have been used; much Armenian homiletic literature and the majority of biblical commentaries (still unpublished) remain to be explored. References to Greek and Syriac parallels have generally been confined to texts translated into Armenian in the fifth century.

² *Yachakhapatum* 17 (Venice, 1954), p. 189.

³ *Meknut'iwn Alöt'its' Pataragin* (Venice, 1869), pp. 42, 53.

*Commentary on the Song of Songs.*¹ And in the *Canons* attributed to the patriarch Sahak many Old Testament parallels to the church as a group of people are adduced. Here we are taught that the church is a rational and spiritual entity, not built of stone and wood but on the rock of faith.²

However, these *Canons* also distinguish between the 'congregation' or 'community' (*zholovurd*) and the place where the people assemble, the *zholovrdanots'* (as in Luke vii. 5; xiii. 10).³ Such places are buildings (*shinuatsov' telik'*) where priests and people gather together for prayer, the liturgy, and other forms of worship. The distinction between the spiritual and physical senses is brought out more explicitly by John of Odzun: 'But it is necessary to know why the term "church" is applied equally to the church which is built of inanimate stones and wood and to the congregations of the faithful. Now just as we understand "paradise" in two ways, so also we should understand "church" in two senses. For "church" is interpreted from the Hebrew among us as "people"; but the same term is also applied to the meeting-place (*zholovaran*), as this is truly built as the house of God since the Son of God is sacrificed therein. Likewise man too is the temple of God according to Paul because of the cleansing of the font and the purity of his life.'⁴ John then proceeds to elaborate on the church as a symbol (*awrinak*)⁵ of faith and virtue.

But in addition to such spiritual interpretations, a more material symbolism may be read into the church as a structure. The eleventh-century historian Aristakēs, bewailing the desolated churches of Armenia, says: 'They exemplified the likeness of heaven through their magnificent constructions.' He has in mind primarily the sumptuousness of their

¹ *Matenagrut'iwnk'* (Venice, 1840), p. 277; cf. also pp. 281, 303, 305, 330, 351.

² *Canon 36*, in *Kanonagirk' Hayots'*, ed. V. Hakobyan, 2 vols. (Erevan, 1964, 1971), I, pp. 386-91. For the use of *ekelets'i* in the Old Testament referring to a group of people see especially p. 389.

³ *Canon 37*, *Kanonagirk'*, I, pp. 391-3.

⁴ *Opera* (Venice, 1834), pp. 308-10. But whether the two discourses printed at the end of this book (pp. 256-312) are definitely John's is not certain. For the term *zholovaran*, cf. Nerses of Lambron, *Letters* (included in Grigor Kat'olikos Tlay, *Namakani*, (Venice 1865)), p. 236; *ekelets'in* or *t'argmani zholovaran*. The theme is elaborated in Nerses' *Commentary on the Liturgy* (*Khorhrdatsut'iwnk' i Kargs Ekelets'woy ew Meknut'iwn Khorhrdats'* *Pataragin* (Venice, 1847)), pp. 120-1. Cf. the definition of the church as *συνάθροισις λαοῦ* in the *Rerum ecclesiasticarum Contemplatio*, P.G. 98. 384, attributed to Germanos I of Constantinople (see R. Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la divine liturgie du VII^e au XV^e siècle*, *Archives de l'Orient chrétien* 9 (Paris, 1966), p. 160), and the *συνάθροισμα λαοῦ* in F. E. Brightman, 'The *Historia Mystagogica* and other Greek Commentaries on the Byzantine Liturgy', *J.T.S.* ix (1908), p. 257.

⁵ For the use of the term *awrinak* as 'symbol' or 'type' see R. W. Thomson, *The Teaching of Saint Gregory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 15-16.

decoration; the worshipper, overawed, might think himself in heaven.¹ But Gregory of Narek in his *Mystic Soliloquy* 75 goes further: § 9, the church is built as the dwelling place of God; § 10, it is a form (*tesak*) of the upper vault (of heaven).² Although in this prayer Gregory is mainly concerned with the church as a spiritual entity—the mystical body of Christ—from these two brief quotations two important points emerge: the O.T. parallels (for the 'dwelling place of God' reminds us in particular of a common theme in the Psalms), and the parallels with the structure of the universe as understood by Gregory and his fellow Armenians. This paper will be primarily concerned with the second of these themes; at the end we shall return to some of the corresponding O.T. parallels.

It is not appropriate here to describe in detail early Armenian conceptions of the nature of physical reality, of the composition of the material world from the four elements, and of the ethereal nature of the vault of the sky.³ But a few ideas derived from the bible are basic to the architectural symbolism.

The *Teaching of Saint Gregory* (the Illuminator) as found in the *History* of Agathangelos opens with a brief description of heaven, earth, and the void.⁴ Heaven is domed (*khoranard*), with a firm roof (? *hastayark*), suspended in the void. The adjective *khoranard* is used in Job xxxviii. 38 to render *κύβος*, while the noun *khoran* renders the *σκηνή* of Isa. xl. 22 and the *δέρπις* of Ps. ciii. 3. It is the theme of the tent that is the more important. *Khoran* occurs several hundred times in the Armenian bible, rendering *σκηνή*, and is one of the key terms used in Armenian architectural symbolism.

In Armenian the basic meaning of *khoran* is 'tent'. Elishē glosses its use in Ps. ciii. 3 as *vran*.⁵ In a secular sense *khoran* refers to a military

¹ *Patmut'iwn* (Erevan, 1963), ch. 10, pp. 55–6. Cf. the wonder of the beholder on entering the church of the Virgin of the Pharos: 'it is as if one had entered heaven itself . . . one is so amazed' (Photius, *Homil.* X. 5), quoted in C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453, Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs N.J., 1972), p. 185.

² *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, pp. 187–98. For the term *kamar* (vault) see below.

³ See, for example, Eznik, III. 1–9; Elishē, *Questions et réponses sur la Genèse*, publié par P. N. Akinean, traduit par Dr. P. S. Kogian (Vienne, 1928); Anania Shirakats'i, *Matenagrut'yunē*, ed. A. G. Abrahamyan (Erevan, 1944). For a later summary of Armenian ideas about the nature of the physical universe see the first part of the *Chronicle* of Mkhitar of Ayrivank: M. Brosset, 'Histoire chronologique par Mkhitar d'Ayrivank, XIII^e S.', *Mémoires de l'Académie impériale des sciences de St.-Pétersbourg*, VII^e serie, tome XIII, no. 5 (St.-Pétersbourg, 1869), esp. pp. 5–6.

⁴ § 259. These paragraph numbers are those of the Tiflis 1909 edition of Agathangelos. For the *Teaching* see p. 103 n. 5, above, and for the *History* see R. W. Thomson, *Agathangelos, History of the Armenians* (Albany, 1976).

⁵ *Questions*, p. 27.

tent¹ or a domed area, such as the shah's audience chamber.² Such a dome is an image (*awrinak*) of the sky;³ for the sky, in Gregory of Narek's words, is 'the upper, inaccessible dome of ether, outside physical space'.⁴ The theme is elaborated by Nerses Shnorhali: heaven is a hemisphere (*kisagund*) like a *khoran*, self-moving and unsupported.⁵

Another term, also found in the Armenian bible, is even more frequently used of the vault of heaven: *kamar*, which renders the *καμάρα* of Isa. xl. 22.⁶ Anania Shirakats'i describes the vault (*kamar*) formed by the fire and air which surround the earth.⁷ Gregory Magistros speaks of the firmament above as a *kamar*.⁸ Gregory of Narek refers to the 'celestial

¹ e.g. Kirakos Gandzakets'i, *Patmut'iwn Hayots* (Erevan, 1960), pp. 161, 233. Smbat Sparapet, *Taregirk'* (Venice, 1956), p. 238, speaks of the race of Ishmaelites (Arabs) as 'tent-dwellers' (*khoranabnak*). Matthew of Edessa, *Patmut'iwn* (Jerusalem, 1869), p. 160, notes that when the Muslims were about to attack Sebaste in 1059/60, they were at first afraid to enter the city because they thought that the numerous white domes of the churches were soldiers' tents (*vrank'*).

² As in Lazar P'arpets'i, *Patmut'iwn Hayots* (Tiflis, 1904), p. 107¹⁶, 19. Cf. also Faustos (P'awstos Buzandats'i), *Patmut'iwn Hayots* (4th edn., Venice, 1933), IV. 54.

³ As in Nerses of Lambron, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, p. 146.

⁴ *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 458 (*On the Church*): *verin anvayr khoran et'ern anmatoyts'*. Cf. Severian, *De Mundi Creatione*, III. 5, P.G. 56.452.

⁵ *Yalags Erkni* (*On Heaven*), Erevan, 1968, p. 21. Cf. also Theodore K'it'enawor, *Chaik' Erek'* (printed in *Yovhannu Imastasiri Awdznets'woy Matenagrut'iwnk'* (Venice, 1833)), p. 170: heaven is a divinely constructed *khoran*.

⁶ Cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses*, IX. 5, with *kamar* in the Armenian version (*Koch'umn Entsayut'ean* (Venice, 1832), p. 147).

But the Armenian version of Basil's *Hexaemeron* (*Chaik' vasn vets'ōreay Ararch'ut'eann* (Venice, 1830)), I. 8 (p. 15), offers an idiosyncratic version of Isa. xl. 22 quoted by Basil. 'Ο οὐρανὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν ὥσει καμάραν is rendered: *o dzgeats' zerkins ibrew zkonk' gmbet'ard ev hastateats' kangueats' zna ibrew zkhoran i bnakut'iwn*, 'who stretched out heaven like a domed conch and established (and) set it like a *khoran* for habitation'. (The Armenian vulgate reads: 'who set heaven like a *kamar* and stretched (it) out like a *khoran* and established the earth to dwell therein.') The Armenian translator has amalgamated Isaiah with the *konk'* of Ezek. xl. 24. etc.; *gmbet'ard* (domed) is not a biblical term, but cf. p. 108 nn. 5, 9, below. The variant *gmbet'ayard* in Basil, *Hexaemeron* III. 4, renders *ἡμικύκλιος*. However, this Armenian version of the *Hexaemeron* is widely divergent from the Greek, often expanding, occasionally abbreviating the original text. For the impact of this version on Armenian astronomy see references in R. W. Thomson, 'The Fathers in Early Armenian Literature', *Studia Patristica*, 12 (1975), p. 467, and for a general study of the Armenian text, K. M. Muradyan, *Barsel Kesarat'sin ev nra 'Vetsōrean' Hay Matenagrut'yan mej* (Erevan, 1976).

⁷ *Matenagrut'yune*, p. 318 (*On the Rotation of Heaven*).

⁸ *T'it'eré* (Alexandropol, 1910), p. 171 (*Letter 70*). In his *Poems* (*Talasats'ut-iwnk'* (Venice, 1868)), p. 5, Gregory elaborates on the nature of the heavens, the *kamar* and *khoran* unsupported by pillars. *Kamar* and *khoran* are also used more or less as synonyms by Nerses Shnorhali, *On Heaven*.

kamar of heaven not made by human hands'.¹ And the later historian Vardan describes in detail the three spheres (*kamarik'*) of fire, water, and air, each above the other, which encircle the earth.² (Even more elaborate, but basically similar, is the description of the universe in Mkhitar of Ayrivank'.)³ The *kamar* of the sky is where God dwells. As John of Odzun explains: 'The Lord's temple is not built in one place, as the Jews had it, but is the supernal vault of heaven at the ends of the world.'⁴ Both *khoran* and *kamar* are widely used in descriptions of the symbolism of a church building. The former more particularly reminds us of the many O.T. images of a tent, while the latter has more or less exclusive reference to the physical aspect of the sky and heaven.

Scattered throughout Armenian historical works from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries are hundreds of references to the building, restoration, or destruction of churches. But although the basic idea of the symbolic parallelism between the vaults or dome of a church and the celestial vault of heaven was familiar to Armenian historians, they rarely expand on it in their descriptions of actual buildings. Even when they describe in detail the materials used, the design of the church, or its decoration, their references to the symbolic meaning of the architecture are usually confined to a few stock phrases. Not surprisingly, it is to the theologians that we must look for more elaborate disquisitions on symbolism. But a brief review of the basic ideas in historical texts will provide us with a background for investigation of the theological texts.

The first churches in Armenia were supposedly built at the orders of St. Gregory the Illuminator on the sites of the pagan temples that he and king Trdat had destroyed. These events—enshrouded in legendary detail—are reported by the writer known as Agathangelos, whose *History* in its surviving form dates to nearly a century and a half after the period it purports to be describing.⁵ The first church was built at Ashtishat in Western Armenia, on the site of the temple of Vahagn, and it enclosed relics of John the Baptist and the martyr Athenogenes.⁶ This became the chief church of the first episcopal see in Armenia, and there the Armenian primates resided through most of the fourth century.

But Agathangelos does not describe this church. The only comments he makes that are relevant to our study concern the chapels erected near

¹ *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 396 (*On the Cross*): *vernayark andzeragorts erknits'* *kamar*.

² *Hawak'umn Patmut'ean* (Venice, 1862), p. 2.

³ Reference as in p. 104 n. 3, above.

⁴ *Opera*, p. 282.

⁵ See the introduction to Thomson, *Agathangelos*.

⁶ Agathangelos, §§ 809–14. See also Faustos, III. 3, 14, 19.

Vałarshapat (in north-eastern Armenia) for the nuns martyred by king Trdat before his conversion. These chapels were made of rock, stone, brick, and cedar-wood (§ 757), and adorned with lamps and candelabras (§ 759). The door-posts were made of massive, unhewn stones (§ 767). Inside the chapels the martyrs were buried in caskets. Over their resting places, in the centre of the domed roof (? *i nerk'sagoyn khoranats'n*) Gregory erected crosses, glossed as 'pillars bearing the weight of the edifice of your salvation' (§ 769). 'Pillar' here is used in a metaphorical sense, but the paragraph seems to imply that Agathangelos had in mind a structure with a central dome supported by pillars. However, the imagery is dependent on Gregory's vision (§§ 731–55), in which—among other predictions—he was shown the sites for three future chapels for the martyrs and for the main cathedral.¹

In the vision the main site was marked with a circular base of gold on which rested a column of fire and capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light. The sites for the martyrs' chapels were marked with red bases (the colour of blood), columns of cloud, capitals of fire, and crosses of light; these columns were lower than the column of light. Above all four crosses, vaults (*kamark'*) fitted into each other. The whole was surmounted by a wonderful canopied (*khoranard*)² construction of cloud in the form of a dome (*gmbet'azdew*). These architectural features (probably based on the architecture of the cathedral at Vałarshapat) are then interpreted in a metaphorical or spiritual sense. The base is the rock of establishment (cf. Matt. vii. 25); the column is the Catholic church (cf. Eph. iv. 13); the capital of cloud is the cloud that will receive the just when they fly up before the Lord at his coming (cf. 1 Thess. iv. 16); the cross on the tallest column is the image of Christ; the other crosses represent the equality and unity of the Catholic church; the canopy (*khoran*) represents the celestial city—the meeting place (*zholovaran*)³ of the kingdom of heaven.

This last is the most important feature of the symbolism, which will be echoed by later writers. The church is the meeting place of the faithful; it is a symbol of the celestial city, the kingdom of heaven; and this symbol is represented in physical terms by the domed or canopied roof supported by vaults that rest on pillars. Agathangelos seems to imply that 'domed' (*gmbet'azdew*) and 'canopied' (*khoranard*) are identical in meaning. Later writers do not distinguish between these two adjectives, nor indeed do they make clear the difference (if any) between the *khoran*

¹ For these churches see A. Khatchatrian, *L'architecture arménienne du IV^e au VI^e siècle* (*Bibliothèque des Cahiers archéologiques* 7, Paris 1971).

² Cf. the description of heaven at p. 104 n. 4, above.

³ Cf. p. 103 n. 4, above.

and the *kamar*, at least in their architectural as opposed to symbolic sense.¹ Both terms are used to describe the vault of the sky above—the image of heaven.²

It is surprising that not until the eighth century are the terms *gmbet'*-*adzew* and *khoranard* found again after Agathangelos, despite the many descriptions of churches in earlier writers, especially Sebēos. John of Odzun uses the two terms to describe the summit of the church which rises up to support the cross on top.³ But his description of the *khoran* with four pillars on the same page probably refers to the baldacchino over the altar. For the basic meaning of the term *khoran* naturally leads to its use for 'tabernacle', 'sanctuary', and the complex over the altar (*selan*). In the following century the historian John Catholicos has many descriptions of the founding of churches, but there is no symbolic imagery to be found in his *History*. The early eleventh-century Stephen of Tarōn, however, is quite explicit. The cathedral of Kars had a circular dome supported by stone columns; the effect was of a dome that resembles heaven.⁴ This expression *khoran erkanman* is dear to him as well as later writers. Stephen uses it of the cathedral at Argina: a heaven-like domed *khoran* with firm pillars;⁵ of the cathedral at Ani—a heaven-like domed *khoran* on lofty vaults—(the church) was resplendent like the vault of heaven;⁶ of the church of St. Gregory at Ani 'wonderfully domed, very lofty and like the sphere of heaven'.⁷

Kirakos uses the term *khoran* in a more restricted sense. He describes the construction of churches with three and five *khorans* (cupolas) in the monastery of Nor Getik. These were domed.⁸ Several times he refers to a church being 'domed like heaven'.⁹ (But the adjective *khoraneay* in Kirakos refers to a tent church, not to the architectural design of a church's roof.)¹⁰ Stephen Orbelean uses the phrase 'domed like heaven' of the churches at Tsalats'-kar¹¹ and at Tat'ev. At Tat'ev the interior had

¹ Cf. the comments of Gregory Magistros and Nerses Shnorhali as cited on p. 105 n. 8, above.

² Cf. the reference in Gregory Tlay, *Elegy on the Capture of Jerusalem*, to the 'sons of Sion and the brides of the upper *khoran*'; Armenian text in E. Dulaurier, *Recueil des historiens des Croisades, Documents arméniens I* (Paris, 1869), p. 272.

³ *Opera*, p. 311.

⁴ *Patmut'iwn Tiezerakan*, III. 7: *bolorapēs gmbet'aworeal . . . erkanman khoran*.
⁵ *Ibid.* III. 9: *gmbet'ard khoran erkanman*.

⁶ *Ibid.* III. 30: *bardzraberdz kamarakw' gmbet'aworeal khoran erkanman . . . jahanazyr ēst erknayin kamarin kat'olikēn surb*.

⁷ *Ibid.* III. 47: *sk'anç'ates tesleamb gmbet'aworeal gunak gerambardz ew erkanman gndin*.
⁸ *Patmut'iwn*, pp. 222-3.

⁹ *Gmbet'ard erkanman*, as at pp. 164, 212, 269.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

¹¹ *Patmut'iwn Nahangin Sisakan* (Tiflis, 1910), p. 71 (ch. 19), where the jemaran was *erkanman hrashak'artar shinuatsov'k' erkagmbēt's* (with two domes) *ew erek' khorans* (with three *khorans*).

been decorated by painters from a distant country of Frankish (*P'rang*) origin; heaven was represented on the main vault above the altar.¹

If the idea of a church as the symbol of the celestial kingdom, the dome representing the vault of heaven, is well known to Armenian writers,² what of the symbolism of other parts of the edifice? Terms such as 'foundation', 'base', 'pillar' are often used in a metaphorical sense of people or aspects of the faith. For example, Gregory Magistros refers to the beatitudes as the base (*khariskh*) and foundation (*himn*) of the faith of the new Israel;³ John Sarkawag refers to the base (*khariskh*) of God's commandments.⁴ Vardan refers to Bartholomew and Thaddeus as pillars (*siwnk'*) of the church⁵—an expression which Gregory T'lay applies generally to the Armenians of the Northern regions.⁶ Kirakos calls Sahak and Mashtots' (among other epithets) the 'pillars' and 'walls' of the church;⁷ while Gregory of Narek can speak of the 'rational stones' of the church, meaning her teachings.⁸ But the only writer who draws symbolic meaning from the stones, walls, doors, windows, and divisions of the material structure is John of Odzun. Not surprisingly, the rites for the blessing of the foundations and the consecration of the finished edifice provide the occasion for most of his comments.⁹

In the rite for the laying of a church's foundations twelve unpolished stones are used. The number twelve reflects the twelve stones taken from the river Jordan (Joshua iv. 3) and Christ's twelve disciples. The stones are washed with water and wine—as Christ washed the apostles' feet and gave them wine to drink at the Last Supper. The stones are placed at the four corners of the church—signifying the four corners of the world. Then the officiating bishop takes the architect's measuring line and marks out the space of the foundations, thus drawing the contrast between God's immeasureless nature and the bounded, finite nature of man. John draws the parallels of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. xl. 3) and the passage in Agathangelos that describes Gregory laying out the foundations of the martyrs' chapels with an architect's *lar* (§ 758). Three

¹ *Patmut'iwn Nahangin Sisakan*, pp. 256–7 (ch. 44).

² Cf. the hymn of censing in the Armenian liturgy, where the church is addressed as: *harsn pantsali erknanman lusachem khoran*.

³ *Letter* 36, p. 89.

⁴ *Yalags K'ahanayut'ean, Sop'erk' Haykakank'* 3 (Venice, 1853), p. 97.

⁵ *Hawak'umn*, p. 84. Cf. Gal. ii. 9.

⁶ *Namakani* (Venice, 1865), p. 84.

⁷ *Patmut'iwn*, p. 27.

⁸ *Mystic Soliloquy* 75, § 14 (*Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 201). Cf. Nerses of Lambron, *Synodal Letter* (*Atenabanut'iwn*), (Venice, 1812), p. 36: the stones of the spiritual temple are the various nations of Christendom.

⁹ The rites are in the *Mashtots'*. I am here following the commentary thereto in *Opera*, pp. 256–78.

times the line of the foundations is drawn out, indicating the three types of the church in the Old Testament: the ark of the covenant, the temple of Solomon,¹ and the temple restored by Zerubabel. The number three has further significance in that there are three of the twelve stones to each side; and twelve is not only a symbol of the apostles, it is the number of the principal limbs of the body and also has certain unique mathematical properties. John also notes that the twelvefold anointing of the altar reflects the mystical words of the twelve prophets. The doors of the church, however, are anointed four times, recalling the composition of the human body from the four elements.²

More significant, though, is John of Odzun's threefold division of the church into sanctuary (*khoran*), nave (*tachar*), and narthex (*gawit'*), for such a division was mystically prefigured by Noah's ark with its three decks. The three decks of the ark are the *nerk'natun*, *mijnatun*, and *vernadzelun* ('ground floor', 'first floor', and 'attic').³ The last term is reminiscent of the description of heaven in Elishé's *Questions*: God made the firmament like the ceiling of a house (*ibrew zdzelun tan*) over the earth.⁴ The same term *dzelun* occurs in Genesis viii. 13, where Noah opens the 'roof' of the ark and sees that the flood is diminishing. The threefold division of the ark (*eramasneay*) is also noted by Gregory Magistros,⁵ but he draws no comparison with the division of the church.⁶

The structure of the church is oriented towards the East—whence we await the second coming. Furthermore, Paradise is in the East.⁷ The window on the East indicates the entry of spiritual light into the world and the just who shine like the rising sun. [In this regard it is interesting to note the change in the number of windows from one to three in the

¹ For parallels between the church and Solomon's temple, cf. Gregory of Narek, *Mystic Soliloquy* 75, § 12 (*Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 200) and *On the Church*, *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 458. Cf. also Ephrem Syrus on Hebrews 8 (Armenian text in *Srboyn Ep'remi Matenagrut'iwnk'* III (Venice, 1836), p. 214) and John Chrysostom, *In Psalmum* 133, P.G. 55.386 (for the Armenian version see references in M. Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* II (Turnhout, 1974), p. 519; but the fragments published by Akinean do not include the text of Ps. cxxxii). Nerses of Lambron, *Synodal Letter*, p. 24, speaks of Constantine as the new Solomon building the splendid temple of the faith of the church; and p. 14, describes the council of Nicaea as Constantine's spiritual temple.

² On such number symbolism in early Armenian writers see further R. W. Thomson, 'Number Symbolism and Patristic Exegesis in some early Armenian Writers', *Handes Amsorya* 90 (1976), cols. 117–38.

³ *Opera*, p. 292.

⁴ *Questions*, p. 27.

⁵ *Letter* 76, p. 221.

⁶ Cf. the threefold division of the Temple as interpreted by Philo and Josephus; J. Daniélou, 'La symbolique du temple de Jérusalem chez Philon et Josephé', *Le symbolisme cosmique des monuments religieux, Serie Orientale Roma* XIV (Roma, I.S.M.E.O., 1957), pp. 83–90.

⁷ John of Odzun, *Opera*, p. 300. Cf. Gregory of Narek, *Mystic Soliloquy* 75, § 14 (*Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 202).

eastern apse of the church of St. Rhipsime, built in 618. Churches with three windows in the main apse are rare in Armenia. This alteration has been plausibly connected with Chalcedonian influence.¹ The side windows figure the humbler contemplation of the mind and the fact that our side (members?) to right and left are illuminated by virtue. The window to the West indicates the light which goes from East to West. The rectangular form of the building summons the four corners of the world to one hope of the calling in Christ to offer worship to the sole God.

John is thus at some variance from the symbolism in the famous Syriac hymn on the church at Edessa.² In the Syriac hymn (strophe 7) the four corners of the world are symbolized by the arches (or vaults, *kap'e*). Three sides of the building (strophe 12)—i.e. the north, south, and west—represent the Trinity; while the light of the windows on those three sides (strophe 14) represents the apostles, prophets, martyrs, and confessors. The three windows in the chancel represent the Trinity (strophe 13).

The nave where the faithful gather, says John, indicates our equality with the angels when we shall all stand before Christ's tribunal (*bem*). The bema itself is the image of heaven, for on it is raised the altar with the priests standing around—as Jesus is raised above the surrounding angels who sing his praises.³ The altar reflects the mystery of the co-substantial Trinity, while the side chapels (*khorhrdanots'k'*) to right and left indicate that the church's vessels are always ready to give merciful gifts to the poor. Likewise the part of the sacrament remaining on the altar shows that the church never lacks the propitiating body of Christ. Furthermore, the sacrament is first placed in the side chapel because Christ first came to us secretly and rested in the Virgin's womb, and then was openly brought to the altar of the cross.

Summarizing the symbolism of the building, John ends by

¹ See A. B. Erémian, 'Sur certaines modifications subies par les monuments arméniens au VII^e siècle', *Revue des Études arméniennes*, n.s. 8 (1971), pp. 251–66 (translated with revisions from the Armenian in *Patmabanasiarakan Handes*, 1966, no. 4, pp. 151–70).

² For the Syriac text see H. Goussen, 'Über eine "Sugitha" auf die Kathedrale von Edessa', *Le Muséon*, 38 (1925), pp. 117–36; there is a revised translation in A. Dupont-Sommer, 'Une hymne syriaque sur la Cathédrale d'Edesse', *Cahiers archéologiques*, 2 (1947), pp. 29–39, and an English version in C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 57–60. For a general study of the symbolism involved see A. Grabar, 'Le témoignage d'une hymne syriaque sur l'architecture de la Cathédrale d'Edesse au VI^e siècle et sur la symbolique de l'édifice chrétien', *Cahiers archéologiques*, 2 (1947), pp. 41–67.

³ For the parallel between the clergy in the *bema* and *khoran* of the church and the heavenly *khoran*, cf. Nerses of Lambron, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, pp. 309 ff.

emphasizing that the sanctuary and nave thus have symbolic meaning.¹ The four columns (which support the dome) indicate the four virtues. The junction of the vaults (*kamarats*) indicates the coupling of love to virtue. The twelve foundation stones indicate the twelve limbs of rational beings, while the juxtaposition of large and small stones indicates the union in piety of men and women—for in Christ there is no distinction of sex. The bonding of the rubble and other materials is a sign of the faithful who are united in one hope of Christ's calling. The edifice which rises in the form of a dome is then crowned with a purple cross, the colour of the divine blood, whereby God brings his children to the supernal Jerusalem. There they will rejoice and exult in the *khoran* of light, and enjoy eternal sustinence.² 'Such,' says John, 'is the symbolic meaning of the building as taught by the holy Spirit.'

John also emphasizes that the 'foundations' of the church are to be found in the Old Testament.³ We may now turn to a more detailed investigation of such O.T. themes in Armenian writers, confining the discussion to parallels for the church as a structure. For although these parallels do not add further light on Armenian architectural symbolism, it may be interesting in the wider context of Eastern Christian thought to note the major themes of Armenian exegesis in this regard.

A very common theme is that of Noah's ark (*tapan*) as a type (*awrinak*) of the church. The threefold division of ark and church in John of Odzun has already been noted. A more general comparison is elaborated at some length by Gregory of Narek,⁴ Gregory Magistros,⁵ and Nerses Shnorhali.⁶ The parallel with a ship is brought out in the *Canons of*

¹ *Opera*, pp. 310–12. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 288: everything in the church 'has symbolic reference to heavenly things' (*zernaynots'n berē ts'oyts' awrinaki*). But we are not here concerned with the symbolism of ecclesiastical ornaments, vessels, and robes to which John devotes much attention.

² The *khoran* of light may be a reminiscence of the liturgical expression quoted in p. 109 n. 2, above. For the heavenly *khoran* cf. also Lazar, *Patmut'iwn*, p. 132: God brought the holy Vasak to himself and settled him in the *khoran*s of the kingdom, with the angels in heaven. Very different is the symbolism of the struggle between light and darkness reflected in the black and white stones in the fourteenth-century church in the monastery of St. Thaddaeus (Iran); see V. A. Khachaturjan, 'Simvolika cveta b odnom armjanskom arkitektturnom pamjatnike XIV veka', *Patmabanasiakan Handes*, 1977, no. 2, pp. 191–8.

³ *Opera*, p. 262: *himunk' ekelets'woy en awrinakk'n airajink'*.

⁴ *Mystic Soliloquy* 75, § 12, *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, pp. 199–200.

⁵ Especially in *Letter* 77 (pp. 224–5). In his *Poems*, p. 80, Gregory Magistros compares the ark with the cross.

⁶ *Opera* (Venice, 1833), II, p. 285. Cf. in general John Chrysostom, *De Lazarō* 6. 7, P.G. 48.1037: *μνστήρια δὲ ἦν τὰ λεγόμενα, καὶ τῶν μελλόντων τύπος τὰ γνώμενα· οτον, ἡ Ἐκκλησία κιβωτός*. Armenian text in *Chařk* (Venice, 1861), p. 546: *khorkhurd ēr gortsu ar i yapay linelots' awrinak: ekelets'woy awrinak ēr tapann, ew Noy Kristosi, ew alawnin surb Hogwoy.*

Sahak, where the incarnate Word of God is described as the ship's captain (*nawapet*) and the apostles, prophets, and teachers as the sailors (*nawavark'*).¹ Similar terminology is found in a homily ascribed to Sahak: the church is the harbour (*nawahangist*) and the bishop is the captain.²

More directly relevant to the tent-like structure of the dome are the O.T. parallels involving the term *khoran*. Gregory Arsharuni notes that Christ bids us dwell as sojourners (*pandkhtabar*) in the *khorans* of his church as in tabernacles (*talawars*)—an allusion to the feast of tabernacles (as Leviticus xxiii. 42).³ More frequent are allusions to the tents of Abraham and Moses. John of Odzun directly compares Abraham's tent which God and the two angels entered (Genesis xviii) to the sanctuary where the Trinity mystically dwells.⁴ (In this connection Gregory Magistros only refers to the angels.)⁵ Referring to the same episode Gregory of Narek uses the noun *talawar* instead of the biblical *khoran*.⁶ The latter word is also used for the ark of the covenant. John of Odzun and Gregory Magistros specifically refer to the mention of this ark on Sinai (e.g. in Exodus xxxiii) as a mystical parallel to the church.⁷

Other parallels with buildings, though somewhat removed from architectural motifs, include the church as tower and as winepress. John of Odzun compares at some length the tower (*ashtarak*) constructed by presumptuous men which led to the scattering of the races, with the tower constructed of firmly secured stones (*hastaheloys vimawk'*) which is the Catholic church.⁸ Of particular Armenian interest is his reference to the Titan Bēl who built the tower, reminding readers of the legends in Book 1 of Moses Khorenats'i and in the *Primary History*.⁹ However,

¹ *Canon* 36, *Kanonagirk'*, I, p. 388. Cf. the *Constitutiones Apostolorum* II. 57.2: ὡς ἄν κυβερνήτης τῆς μεγάλης μετ' ἐπιστήμης πάσης κέλευ ποιεῖσθαι τὰς συνόδους, παραγγέλλων τοῖς διακόνοις ὡσανεῖ ναύταις τοὺς τόπους ἐκτάσσεων τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς καθάπτερ ἐπιβάταις . . . (ed. F. X. Funk, Paderborn, 1905, p. 159).

² *Sop'erk' Haykakank' 2* (Venice, 1853), p. 117. Cf. the *Canon of the Holy Ark* (*Sharakank'*, Venice, 1907, p. 407), where it is described as the 'harbour of the just'. For the theme of the harbour see E. R. Hambye, 'The Symbol of the "Coming to the Harbour"', *Symposium Syriacum* 1972, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (Rome, 1974), pp. 401–11. For the theme of church and ark see in general J. Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality* (London, 1960), pp. 69–112, and idem, *Primitive Christian Symbols* (London, 1964), pp. 58–70.

³ *Meknut'ivn Ēnt'erts'uatsots'* (Venice, 1964), ch. 28 (p. 176).

⁴ *Opera*, p. 294.

⁵ *Letter* 77, p. 225.

⁶ *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, p. 458 (*On the Church*).

⁷ John, *Opera*, p. 296; Gregory, *Letter* 77, p. 225.

⁸ *Opera*, p. 294. For the Syriac symbolism see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 219–24.

⁹ i.e. the first section of the *History* attributed to Sebēos. For an English translation of Moses and the *Primary History*, see R. W. Thomson, *Moses*

more usual in Armenian is the parallelism between the tower and the cross—a major theme in the *Teaching of Saint Gregory*.¹

The idea of the church as a winepress is widely attested in patristic exegesis (with especial reference to the headings of Psalms viii, lxxx, lxxxiii).² In Armenian an example is Theodore K'it'enavor's reference to the Virgin Mary as a wondrously divine winepress (*hntsan*), source of the wine of Christ in the church which is built as a winepress (*hntsana-shēn ekelets'i*).³ But the most interesting use of this theme occurs in the *History of Agathangelos*: when Rhipsime and her companions—whose martyrdom becomes the occasion for the Armenian king's conversion—arrive in Armenia as they flee from Diocletian, they take refuge outside the Armenian capital in the vat-stores (*hndzayanayarks*, the buildings that house the winepresses).⁴ The Greek version of the Armenian has merely *εἰς τὰς ληνούς*.⁵ In view of the role of these nuns in the story as the source of conversion to Christianity, and the vat-store as the site of one of the chapels built by Gregory, a more symbolic hiding-place would be difficult to find.

Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians (Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, 4, Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

¹ See especially §§ 581–6, 628–31. Cf. also Gregory Magistros, *Poems*, p. 80, and Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 14.2 (Armenian text edn., L. Leloir, CSCO 137 (Arm. 1), Louvain, 1953). For parallels in Greek patristic literature see G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961–8), s.v. πύργος.

² See the references in Lampe, *Lexicon*, s.v. ληνός, and for Syriac evidence see Murray, *Symbols*, pp. 100, 122.

³ *Charik' Erek'*, p. 178.

⁴ § 150. (*Hndzyan* is a frequent variant spelling of *hntsan*.)

⁵ For the Greek version of the surviving Armenian text (as opposed to Greek versions of Agathangelos not derived from the extant Armenian) see G. Lafontaine, *La version grecque ancienne du livre arménien d'Agathange*, *Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain* 7 (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1973). For the other Greek versions see the references in Thomson, *Agathangelos*, pp. xxii, 436–7.